

VU Research Portal

The occult does not exist: A response to Terence Ranger

ter Haar, G.; Ellis, S.

published in

Africa

2009

DOI (link to publisher)

[10.3366/E0001972009000874](https://doi.org/10.3366/E0001972009000874)

document version

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

[Link to publication in VU Research Portal](#)

citation for published version (APA)

ter Haar, G., & Ellis, S. (2009). The occult does not exist: A response to Terence Ranger. *Africa*, 79(03), 399-412. <https://doi.org/10.3366/E0001972009000874>

General rights

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the public portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the public portal ?

Take down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

E-mail address:

vuresearchportal.ub@vu.nl

THE OCCULT DOES NOT EXIST: A RESPONSE TO TERENCE RANGER

Gerrie ter Haar and Stephen Ellis

In 2007, *Africa* published a review article by Terence Ranger (2007) concerning 'medicine murders', 'child witches' and the construction of 'the occult'. Ranger frames his review with remarks concerning a murder inquiry by London's Metropolitan Police that was set up after the discovery in the River Thames of the dismembered corpse of a young boy of probable West African origin, whom the police dubbed 'Adam'.

Briefly, Ranger admonishes the British police for making use of a crude stereotype of Africa in their inquiry. He goes on to present his own views by way of a critique of a number of recent works on religion in Africa. Ranger does not explain what he means by 'the occult', but it is clearly the category to which he consigns such anti-social and violent or vicious practices as 'medicine murders' and 'witchcraft'. Ranger distinguishes between 'religion' and 'the occult' without explicitly stating what the difference between them is, although in another publication (Ranger 2006: 351) he concedes that it is 'very important, though extraordinarily difficult' to distinguish between religion and certain closely related elements, among which he names 'magic' and 'witchcraft'.

The present article challenges Ranger's argument concerning 'the occult' on the grounds that 'the occult' is one of many concepts and expressions used in Western academic writing that carries a heavy ideological baggage. Other common expressions falling in this category include 'magic' and 'witchcraft', both of which are indelibly marked by their colonial usage.¹ Continued use of these terms is flawed by their association with a long tradition of thinking of Africa as a continent stuck in a traditional past, to be understood only in terms different from those applied to the rest of humanity today. The choice of language by academics is a matter of great importance. As Harold Turner long ago noted in regard to African-initiated churches, 'our approach to any range of phenomena is both revealed and influenced by the names we bestow upon it' (1976: 13). Our point is not to argue that 'magic', 'witchcraft' or 'the occult' do not deserve to be debated, but that they

GERRIE TER HAAR is Professor of Religion and Development at the Institute of Social Studies, The Hague. Stephen Ellis is the Desmond Tutu professor in the faculty of social sciences, Free University (VU) Amsterdam, and senior researcher at the Afrika Studiecentrum, Leiden.

¹Until the 1970s, concepts such as 'magic' and 'primitive religion' were generally seen by scholars as unproblematic and of universal application within an evolutionary framework. In a classic work on British history, for example, Keith Thomas (1973: 52) specifically compares early modern England to Africa. For a discussion on the applicability of the term 'witchcraft' today, see the introductory chapter in ter Haar (2007).

cannot be understood in their proper historical and moral context as long as the debate is couched in a language that is so heavily loaded.

Religious phenomena—even those that one may personally find repugnant—are best described in neutral terms. This implies that, if scholars are to break with the tradition of regarding Africa as an exceptional continent, they need to describe practices and ideas by applying categories that can also be used, at least in principle, in regard to any other human society. If we take this as a point of departure, it is apparent that many of the phenomena that Terence Ranger considers to fall into the category of ‘the occult’ are better placed within the purview of religion more generally. This, of course, depends on how one defines religion—something that Ranger neglects to do, just as he does not define any of the other key concepts he uses. It is not a matter of choosing a favourite definition of religion from among the many dozens on offer. What is required is to formulate a definition that emerges from the context under study. Elsewhere we have proposed a working definition of religion in Africa as ‘a belief in the existence of an invisible world, distinct but not separate from the visible one, that is home to spiritual beings with effective powers over the material world’ (Ellis and ter Haar 2004: 14). This is a working definition, elaborated with a view to incorporating the entire range of religious practices and ideas in Africa. In passing, we may note that it applies to many other parts of the world, too. It is deliberately couched in terms that are morally neutral and value-free. It allows for the inclusion of a broad range of mystical beliefs and practices, irrespective of whether observers consider them to be positive or negative. The latter is precisely what Ranger (2007: 276) objects to in our approach. However, spiritual power, a concept that is crucial to understanding religion in Africa, can be employed for both socially constructive and destructive purposes. This is a capital point, but one that Ranger avoids, apparently on account of his own moral position.

Connections between religion and morality are historically formed; they are not the same in all societies. As we discuss below, a specific connection was developed in early Christianity that still colours the views of many authors today. In this regard, Terence Ranger appears to be one of the many writers who have come to think of religion as something that is (or at least should be) concerned with whatever is good and life-affirming. Adopting such a view leaves no room for ideas and practices relating to a perceived invisible world that are destructive or anti-social. These are precisely the sorts of beliefs and practices that Ranger does not consider to be part of religion, but that he instead consigns to a separate category of ‘the occult’.

Hence, Ranger’s review article raises important theoretical problems that we propose to address. We begin this task by examining the genealogy of some key ideas concerning the concept of religion. This, we believe, takes us closer to constructing a suitable theoretical framework for discussing such matters as Terence Ranger places within the category of ‘the occult’. This is a term widely used by evangelicals in the USA to designate ‘bad’ religion (Jenkins and Maier-Katkin

1992: 62) that has been popularized by Jean and John Comaroff (1999) as a quasi-technical term, notably in regard to Africa. Although Ranger tells us (2006: 360) that he dislikes the term 'occult', he continues to use it to designate beliefs and practices that are socially destructive.

'GOOD' AND 'BAD' RELIGION

So deep has been the historical effect of European practices of labelling and categorization that even the terms 'religious' and 'religion' require some elucidation. For these words, too, carry a historical burden, having been introduced by Europeans in reference to a wide range of practices that they encountered in other parts of the world in early modern times. A major problem arises from the way in which, over a long period, Europeans imposed on other societies, or at least attributed to them, ideas that derived from Europe's own particular history. There exists a substantial corpus of literature, produced notably by academic specialists in the study of religion, that investigates the long historical pedigree of the term 'religion' as it is presently used. This literature reveals the relationship between political power, intellectual authority and social practice in the formation of new, globalized, ideas of religion in recent centuries (for example, Asad 1993; Masuzawa 2005).

European writers in mediaeval and early modern times considered that there were four types of religious observer: Christians, Jews, Mohammedans (as Muslims were then known as), and 'the rest', meaning all others deemed to be attached to some form of idolatry (Masuzawa 2007: 181). This characteristic, fourfold division of religions persisted into the early nineteenth century. By that time, it had become apparent to European intellectuals that a more complex classification was necessary, not least in order to accommodate the sophisticated beliefs enshrined in Buddhism, which possessed all the hallmarks of what a European intellectual of those days could regard as a 'real' religion as opposed to a mere superstition. Indigenous African religious practices, meanwhile, remained consigned to a residual category that included – to use the vocabulary of the nineteenth century – polytheists, animists and idolators.

In sub-Saharan Africa, the introduction of a new vocabulary regarding the invisible world was part of a far more general imposition of new administrative arrangements and practices of power of Western origin or inspiration. Among the novelties of the age of colonialism was the identification of religion and politics as two distinct realms, which should properly be subject to institutional and intellectual separation.

This new vocabulary and conceptual order gave a new meaning to ideas and practices in African societies concerning the invisible world, cutting across existing categories and thereby distorting the empirical reality of indigenous religious experience as well as its various expressions. It is for this reason that many African scholars in the field of religion have reacted against the vocabulary and some of the

conceptual categories that were introduced in the nineteenth century. As David Westerlund (1985: 87–8) has noted:

In the works of African scholars there is often sharp criticism of Western terms designating different aspects of African religion. Many of these terms are considered to be inadequate and derogatory. For instance, words like 'animism' and 'fetishism' are considered inappropriate as general labels of African religion, and it is stressed that they have been used by Western scholars in order to ridicule this religion.

In the light of the above remarks, the concept of 'the occult' may be seen to be a recent addition to the stock of labels designating those aspects of African religion that observers find bizarre, distasteful, or, in any event, that they do not consider to be part of any 'true' religion.

The identification of ideas and practices deemed worthy to be included in the category of 'religion', as opposed to those of a supposedly lesser order disqualified for inclusion in this same category, has a long history. The distinction between 'religion' and less worthy forms of practice, often glossed as 'superstition', may be traced back through early modern times to the classical Roman tradition of distinguishing *religio* and *superstitio* (Pagden 1986: 168–9). Awareness of how these terms have evolved throws considerable light on the European penchant for distinguishing 'true' from 'false' religion, or 'good' from 'bad' religion.

For the ancient Romans, *religio* was an organized and controlled activity of the patrician class. *Superstitio*, by contrast, was the religious practice of the lower orders of Roman society, associated with perceived social and intellectual disorder (Momigliano 1977: 141–59). In regard to the twin concepts of *religio* and *superstitio*, Italo Ronca (1992: 43) has observed that 'neither the terms themselves nor their negative correlation are cross-cultural universals to be reckoned with in all cultures or at all times: in many areas not influenced by Christianity there is no equivalent to such conceptual terminology'. Modern connotations of 'religion' and 'superstition', as well as their semantic polarity, he argues (1992: 44), are the result of a long theistic tradition. The meaning of these terms is historically conditioned, as are their correlative semantic fields.

The identification by European thinkers and administrators of certain practices as being either religious or superstitious in nature has had a formative effect not only on Africa but on societies in many parts of the world. Some of the effects of these processes of categorization have been well described by the Korean scholar Chin Hong Chung (2007). He notes that before the late nineteenth century the Korean language had no equivalent to the word 'religion'. It was an alien term that entered Korea as part of a more general process of modernization, in this case transmitted via Japan. According to Chung (2007: 206):

[t]he concept of religion never succeeded in incorporating our experience fully, and it has been utilized as an inappropriate measure and criterion in the description and understanding of our traditional belief culture.

It is unavoidable, therefore, to reach the point where the empirical reality of traditional religious experience and its expression is distorted, devalued, and confused by such a newly enforced word as 'religion'.

In Africa, a similar process took place to the one outlined by Chung in regard to Korea. In Africa too, many or probably most languages appear to have had no ready translation for the word 'religion' prior to evangelization by Christian missionaries, and no equivalent experience.

WRITING ON RELIGION IN AFRICA

J. D. Y. Peel has noted (2000: 88–122) in regard to the Yoruba that a wide range of what would now be regarded as indigenous religious practices were originally subsumed in an expression used by West African speakers of English in the nineteenth century, 'making country fashion'. How indigenous practices in relation to an invisible world have subsequently been construed by writers, clerics, politicians and officials as either 'religion' or 'superstition', or how they have been labelled by some other name, is a process that has had a great bearing on local perceptions of spiritual power and on the moral value attached to attempts to access such power. In order to illustrate this more fully, a brief summary is helpful.

Generally speaking, one may identify two phases in the history of the study of religion in Africa (Platvoet 1996). The first of these can be described as 'Africa as object', referring to an early period in which religious data were studied by scholars from outside Africa, many of them amateur ethnographers. This cohort of early foreign collectors, antiquaries and observers established many of the basic approaches, methods, concepts and labels used subsequently. A second phase is that of 'Africa as subject', when similar data were also being studied by professionally trained specialists, including African scholars, most recently based in African universities. Accompanying this change of phase from Africa-as-object to Africa-as-subject was a change in the moral value that observers ascribed to religion in Africa. In the high Victorian period, missionaries and colonizers generally considered indigenous African religious practices to be pretty much uniformly contemptible because they did not constitute 'true' religion, with a partial exception being made only for Islam. Early Christian evangelists often considered indigenous religious practices as 'a kind of absence', as Peel (2000: 12) has noted in regard to Nigeria. In other words, they were not perceived to have any real substance.

In general, it was only after the institution of colonial rule that opinions like these tended to change somewhat. Some colonial officials, spending long periods in Africa, came to see the complexity and subtlety of African religious ideas. If only for administrative purposes, they had to learn to understand the relationship of indigenous religion to justice, land tenure and other matters affecting the social and political

order. The colonial period also witnessed the arrival of professional anthropologists in Africa, who tended to view African religious ideas and practices in functional terms, as the cultural epiphenomena associated with specific social and political complexes bearing an ethnic label. Thus was the concept of ethnic religions formed, with a plethora of books on Zulu religion, Yoruba religion, and many others. This was of a piece with the view characteristic of European administrators and scholars until quite late in the colonial period that Africa was best understood as being divided into thousands of discrete ethnic communities, each having its own culture and its own religion. There also emerged texts from African intellectuals trained in European methods, who were able to describe in the academic vocabulary of their day the religious and cultural systems that they knew from within (for example, Kenyatta 1938).

By the time African countries gained political independence, from the late 1950s onwards, the colonial administrations that were then disappearing, and the expatriate colonial society associated with them, included quite a few individuals who had come to appreciate the subtlety and social usefulness of African religious thought. They found common cause with African intellectuals who were, by this time, able to express their ideas in print more easily than before. African theologians of the generation of Bolaji Idowu (1962) and John Mbiti (1969) turned colonial values on their heads, much as nationalist ideologues were also doing, by claiming that certain elements of Africa's cultures previously condemned by Europeans as negative should in fact be considered positively. Many writers in this genre, European or African, were themselves practising Christians or, at least, had undergone a church or missionary education that had impressed on them the basic tenets of Christian religion.

African theologians in particular in the mid- to late twentieth century articulated what may be called a 'theology of continuity' (Westerlund 1985: 89). This refers to a process of interpreting African religious ideas and practices in the light of Christianity, in such a way as to identify elements of African indigenous religions that appear to resemble or anticipate aspects of Christian belief. Typical of this enterprise was the construction of African Traditional Religion—in the singular, and with capital letters—as a system of belief comparable to other major religions. One result of this change of perspective was to suggest that the African sub-continent is not divided into autonomous areas, each with its own distinctive religion corresponding to an ethnic identity, as earlier generations of Europeans had often supposed. Instead, commentators now tended to discern some of the similarities between religious ideas and practices over wide tracts of Africa, for example in regard to healing, noting that certain cults may mobilize people over very wide areas, creating a religious geography that transcends political boundaries (Ranger 1991).

The nationalist discourse of the mid-twentieth century, in both political and theological forms, aimed at restoring the dignity of African culture (quite often in the singular rather than the plural) after the

indignities and misrepresentations heaped on it by European scholars and colonialists. Terence Ranger has been a distinguished contributor to this work of rehabilitation in both religious and political fields, being a pioneer in the re-evaluation and reinterpretation of African religious ideas and practices (for example, Ranger and Kimambo 1972) and a leading historian of African nationalism (Ranger 1967). For more than four decades, Ranger has remained faithful to a vision of religion in Africa as essentially a search for harmony, a point he expresses in his review article (Ranger 2007: 276) when he refers to the importance of individual and collective healing, rain making, peacemaking and environmental protection as key elements of African religions.

These are indeed distinctive elements of African religious practices. They fit easily into a view of African religions that represents religion as fundamentally a search for what is 'good' and positive, reflecting current translations of key Christian ideas. However, such a framework of analysis, rooted in Christian theology, pays little heed to religious ideas that underlie practices less appealing to a liberal sensibility. It leaves no conceptual room for religious practices that are not easily assimilated into a view of religion as a personal and social good. It makes no allowance for inclusion of beliefs and practices that are not concerned with such demonstrably useful or socially constructive matters as healing and reconciliation. It reflects a perspective that descends in an unbroken genealogical line from the early modern categorization of the world that we have summarized above, distinguishing 'true' or 'good' religion from 'false' or 'bad' religion or superstition. A similar approach is replicated in anthropological views of religion in Africa inasmuch as these have tended to consider religion primarily in terms of social practices and institutions, to be judged by its social utility. This has diverted attention from the intellectual dimension of religion in Africa.

In other words, there exists a tradition in social science of considering religion in Africa as primarily something that binds people together, a means of social cohesion.² At this point we find ourselves once more drawn back to a very old debate at the heart of Christianity, namely that concerning the original meaning of 'religion'. It is often suggested that the English word 'religion' derives ultimately from the Latin *religare*, meaning 'to re-bind'. However, no less an expert than the pre-Christian orator Cicero was clear in stating that *religio* was derived from *relegere/religere*, meaning 'to re-trace, to re-collect', referring to the practice of divination as one of the three pillars—together with prayer and sacrifice—of Roman religion. It was later Christian authors, notably Augustine of Hippo (354–430), one of the founding fathers of the Church, who were intent on regarding *religio* as that which binds man to God by means of love, insisting on deriving the word from

² In the social sciences, the most influential proponent of the idea that religion is something that binds people is Durkheim (1912).

religare (Ronca 1992: 52–3). This marked a decisive shift from the classical Roman view of religion as a human response to a continuous stream of revelatory messages from an invisible world (as it was seen by Cicero and other pre-Christian authors) to a Christian articulation of religion in terms of a bond between man and God. From a Christian perspective, the nature of the latter relationship was held to have been fully revealed through the person of Jesus, which made further revelation unnecessary, such as through divination.

The interest of this brief reference to debates in early Christianity is the insight it provides concerning the historical transformations in the concept of religion in European history. Here, some of the problems in applying the term ‘religion’ to Africa become apparent. Since the expansion of Europe in early modern times, Europeans have imposed a Christian interpretation of the concept ‘religion’ on other parts of the world, ignoring the deeper history of ‘religion’ in those places, and even in the ancient history of Europe itself. The emergence of a secular social science has made little difference in this regard, as social scientists have, apparently unknowingly in many cases, continued an old Christian apologetic by supposing that the true meaning of religion lies in its binding force.

We see here that nothing much has changed since colonial times other than the normative value attached to specific African practices. What is constant is the insistence that good and bad do not belong together in ‘true’ religion.

THE PROBLEM OF ‘THE OCCULT’

The working definition of religion that we have provided is placed in a broad theory of religion and politics (Ellis and ter Haar 2004) that corresponds to paradigms concerning the relationship between the visible and invisible worlds that are widespread among Africans. Political power is widely perceived as originating in the invisible world. This is one reason why many African politicians devote serious attention to the spirit world. As Max Weber (1946: 123) observed in one of his most celebrated essays, ‘he who lets himself in for politics, that is, for power and force as means, contracts with diabolical powers’. This resonates in Africa, where religious activity is most persuasively understood as a search for spiritual power rather than in terms of an Augustinian theology. It is important to note in this regard that in African histories, ideas about the power of good and evil have typically been contained within a single mental framework. Many Africans regard power as morally ambiguous, and appear to have done so for centuries. This means that healers are also seen as potential killers due to the morally ambiguous nature of the spiritual powers that they are deemed to possess. The mystical powers attributed to them are not thought of as literally supernatural, but as *natural* forces.

What Terence Ranger and others call 'the occult' is therefore best understood in terms of mystical power. The central element in the identification of certain practices as 'occult' seems actually to be the experience of evil (cf. Ranger 2006: 355). However, the experience of evil is not limited to certain societies only. The main problem with using 'the occult' as a separate category is thus that it deprives analysts of sophisticated tools for thinking about culturally embedded notions of evil. Practices of the type labelled by Ranger as 'occult' do exist. The problem is how to understand them.

Social scientists tend to respond in one of three ways to reports of 'occult' events in Africa, such as violence motivated by witchcraft beliefs or killings carried out to obtain body parts. A frequent reaction is simply to avert one's gaze, considering such occurrences as aberrations that it would be distasteful or unjustifiable to include in any mainstream social analysis, or to question whether such things really happen. Terence Ranger seems to come close to this position, implying that the British police were wrong even to consider that the killing of the boy Adam, whose corpse they found in the River Thames in September 2001, might conceivably have been perpetrated in an attempt to acquire spiritual power. A second response is to interpret such matters as explicable in terms of specific cultures, an approach that few academics are likely to adopt nowadays. A third point of view, much in vogue in recent anthropology, is to regard such behaviour as expressions of economic forces, construed as so-called 'occult economies'. This last point of view is criticized quite effectively by Terence Ranger in his review article (2007). However, none of these three ways of reacting to 'occult' events is satisfactory, or at least not without considerable clarification and nuance.

We do not know, for lack of evidence, why the boy Adam was killed. Whether he was killed by someone in search of spiritual power is unknown. What is clear, though, is that killing in order to obtain spiritual power does take place. Where there is evidence that such an event has occurred, in our view any analysis has to begin by considering what the perpetrators might have had in mind. This is because '[t]he insider's perception of reality is instrumental to understanding and accurately describing situations and behaviours' (Fetterman 1989: 30). Hence, the pursuit of spiritual power falls within the category of religion, as suggested by our working definition. This is an operational definition that proceeds by 'taking African epistemologies seriously' (Ellis and ter Haar 2007), in other words by taking African modes of thought as a point of departure. Socially positive and socially harmful practices both exist within the field of religion. Referring to a specific act or practice as 'religious' does not imply any definite moral value since, academically speaking, religion itself is neither good nor bad, but morally ambiguous. Placing so-called 'occult' practices within a broader religious field helps us to understand the full range of their moral, social and political meanings.

CONCLUSION

The review article by Terence Ranger published in *Africa* is not centrally concerned with Scotland Yard's investigation of the supposed murder of the boy known to the British police as Adam. Really, what Ranger does is to use the story of the murder inquiry as a literary device, a peg on which to hang his discussion of the academic literature on 'the occult' in regard to Africa. He proposes his own method for investigating 'the occult', emphasizing the importance of context, the crucial need to disaggregate data, and the significance of history (Ranger 2007: 282). Putting things into context and sifting data carefully, however, no matter how skilfully done, will not get us much closer to the goal of understanding if this process is itself based on categories that are unsound. This, we have argued, is the case with the concept of 'the occult'.

Perhaps Ranger believes that the killing of people for ritual purposes, such as to obtain body parts, does not actually occur, or only very rarely. Yet there is overwhelming evidence that such practices do occur and have important social and political consequences. In Nigeria, according to official estimates, there were as many as 6,000 so-called 'ritual murders' between 1992 and 1996, although this figure does not seem to be the result of careful gathering of statistics (Harnischfeger 2006: 61). Archbishop Peter Akinola (2007), leader of Nigeria's 20 million practising Anglicans, has described how he himself came close to being killed in his youth by an uncle who 'was going to sacrifice me for a ritual to make money'. Akinola attributes his own religious vocation to the trauma of this experience. In the trial currently taking place in The Hague of Charles Taylor, the former President of Liberia has been alleged by former associates to have headed a group that regularly carried out such activities for the purpose of acquiring spiritual power (Marzah 2008: 6087–159). Comi Toulabor (2000) has written a brave essay on killings carried out by politicians in West Africa in pursuit of spiritual power. Regarding body parts, in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the township of Umlazi in Durban, South Africa, experienced a '*muti* murder' about once a fortnight, and some nearby settlements as many as six times per month (Evans 1992: 51). This suggests that the number of such killings in KwaZulu-Natal alone ran into dozens per year. In Tanzania, in April 2008 President Jakaya Kikwete publicly condemned the killing of albinos for body parts; nineteen killings had reportedly taken place in the previous year (BBC 2008). As for witchcraft accusations, the large number of these in some countries is well attested, for example in South Africa, where hundreds of people have been killed on these grounds (Ralushai Commission 1996), as well as in other parts of Africa (ter Haar 2007). In some African diaspora communities also, there have been accounts of serious crimes being committed for reasons connected to a belief in spiritual power. These have led for example to prosecutions of people accused of assault in regard to beatings they have inflicted on children suspected of witchcraft (Dodd 2005).

It may be noted that we have drawn examples from southern, eastern and West Africa here, as well as from outside the continent. One of the objections that Ranger has made in regard to the methods of the British police is precisely that they have lumped data from different parts of Africa, failing to disaggregate and specify. We emphasize that our purpose is not to suggest that there is 'an aggregated African occult' (Ranger 2007: 277) in the sense that acts shown to have occurred in one place are therefore liable to take place throughout the sub-continent. Our point is to suggest that such practices do actually occur with some frequency in separate parts of Africa and that they are in fact religious actions in the sense that they emanate from the belief in an invisible world inhabited by spiritual forces deemed to have effective powers over the material world. They reflect religious ideas that are quite widespread in Africa, although of course with regional variations. The authors of probably the most detailed historical study of so-called medicine murders, in regard to colonial Lesotho, have no doubt that 'medicine murder was, and is, a hideous reality' (Murray and Sanders 2005: 290). Moreover, they explicitly suggest a framework for comparison with other countries within the southern African region and also find the idea of a comparison with West Africa to be admissible (*ibid.*: 299–310, 443, note 3).

We should be clear about the point of listing these examples of religious practices associated with criminal acts. The widespread acceptance by Africanist scholars of 'the occult' as an analytical category appears to have caused some of them to dismiss from the outset reports of crimes allegedly carried out in pursuit of spiritual power. Consequently, they may feel little need to examine empirical data at all. Thus Ranger has made no effort to investigate the death of the boy Adam beyond commenting on reports of the police investigation. He has not carried out significant research into the actual occurrence or non-occurrence of the practices alleged. Furthermore, some academics (for example van Dijk 2001), equipped with theories of questionable value concerning 'occult' economies, disqualify other sectors of society altogether as legitimate interpreters of reality. Those dismissed in this way include not only European police forces but also, most importantly, African communities both in Africa and in Europe. Yet these so-called 'occult' practices are also forms of serious crime, in some cases involving killing, people trafficking, and so on. They surely demand empirical investigation in the first instance. Finally, as we have noted elsewhere (Ellis and ter Haar 2004: 149–50), social scientists who discuss beliefs and practices of this sort outside their proper context fail to appreciate their seriousness in moral terms, as threats to human life and human rights.

REFERENCES

- Akinola, P. (2007) *The Times*, 5 July, interview with Ruth Gledhill.
 Asad, T. (1993) *Genealogies of Religion: discipline and reasons of power in Christianity and Islam*. Baltimore MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.

- BBC World Service (2008) 'Tanzania in witchdoctor crackdown', 3 April, (<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/7327989.stm>), accessed 15 June 2008.
- Chung, Chin Hong (2007) 'Religion-before religion and religion-after religion' in G. Ter Haar and Y. Tsuruoka (eds) (2007) *Religion and Society: an agenda for the twenty first century*. Brill: Leiden.
- Comaroff, Jean and John L. (1999) 'Occult economies and the violence of abstraction: notes from the South African postcolony', *American Ethnologist* 26 (2): 279–303.
- Dodd, V. (2005) 'More children "victims of cruel exorcisms"', *The Guardian*, 4 June, p. 10.
- Durkheim, E. (1912) *Les formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse: le système totémique en Australie*. Paris: Alcan.
- Ellis, S. and G. Ter Haar (2004) *Worlds of Power: religious thought and political practice in Africa*. London and New York NY: C. Hurst and Co. and Oxford University Press.
- (2007) 'Religion and politics: taking African epistemologies seriously', *Journal of Modern African Studies* 45 (3): 385–401.
- Evans, J. (1992) 'On brûle bien les sorcières: les meurtres "muti" et leur répression', *Politique Africaine* 48: 47–57.
- Fetterman, D. M. (1989) *Ethnography, Step by Step*. Newbury Park CA: Sage Publications.
- Harnischfeger, J. (2006) 'State decline and the return of occult powers: the case of Prophet Eddy in Nigeria', *Magic, Ritual, and Witchcraft* 1 (1): 56–78.
- Idowu, E. Bolaji (1962) *Olódumārè: God in Yoruba belief*. London: Longman.
- Jenkins, P. and D. Maier-Katkin (1992) 'Satanism: myth and reality in a contemporary moral panic', *Crime, Law and Social Change* 17 (1): 53–75.
- Kenyatta, J. (1938) *Facing Mount Kenya: the tribal life of the Gikuyu*. London: Secker and Warburg.
- Marzah, J. (2008) 14 March Testimony in the trial of Charles G. Taylor. (<http://www.sc-sl.org/Transcripts/Taylor/14March2008.pdf>), accessed 15 June 2008.
- Masuzawa, T. (2005) *The Invention of World Religions: or, how European universalism was preserved in the language of pluralism*. Chicago IL: University of Chicago Press.
- (2007) 'Theory without method: situating a discourse analysis on religion' in G. Ter Haar and Y. Tsuruoka (eds) (2007) *Religion and Society: an agenda for the twenty first century*. Brill: Leiden.
- Mbiti, J. S. (1969) *African Religions and Philosophy*. London: Heinemann.
- Momigliano, A. (1977) *Essays in Ancient and Modern Historiography*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- Murray, C. and P. Sanders (2005) *Medicine Murder in Colonial Lesotho: the anatomy of a moral crisis*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press for the International African Institute.
- Pagden, A. (1986) *The Fall of Natural Man: the American Indian and the origins of comparative ethnology*. First paperback edition. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Peel, J. D. Y. (2000) *Religious Encounter and the Making of the Yoruba*. Bloomington IN: Indiana University Press.
- Platvoet, J. G. (1996) 'The religions of Africa in their historical order' in J. G. Platvoet, J. L. Cox and J. K. Olupona (eds), *The Study of Religions in Africa: past, present and prospects*. Cambridge: Roots and Branches.

- Ralushai Commission (1996) 'Report of the Commission of Inquiry into Witchcraft Violence and Ritual Murders in the Northern Province of the Republic of South Africa'. Pietersburg: The Commission.
- Ranger, T. O. (1967) *Revolt in Southern Rhodesia, 1896–97: a study in African resistance*. London: Heinemann.
- (1991) 'African Traditional Religion' in S. Sutherland and P. Clarke (eds), *The Study of Religion, Traditional and New Religion*. London: Routledge.
- (2006) 'African religion, witchcraft and the liberation war in Zimbabwe' in B. Nicolini (ed.), *Studies in Witchcraft, Magic, War and Peace in Africa: nineteenth and twentieth centuries*. Lewiston NY: Edwin Mellen Press.
- (2007) 'Scotland Yard in the bush: medicine murders, child witches and the construction of the occult: a literature review', *Africa* 77 (2): 272–83.
- Ranger, T. and I. N. Kimambo (eds) (1972) *The Historical Study of African Religion: with special reference to East and Central Africa*. London: Heinemann Educational.
- Ronca, I. (1992) 'What's in two names: old and new thoughts on the history and etymology of *religio* and *superstitio*' in S. Prete (ed.), *Respublica Literarum: Studies in the Classical Tradition* 15 (1): 43–60.
- Ter Haar, G. (ed.) (2007) *Imagining Evil: witchcraft beliefs and accusations in contemporary Africa*. Trenton NJ: Africa World Press.
- Thomas, K. (1973) *Religion and the Decline of Magic*. London: Penguin.
- Toulabor, C. (2000) 'Sacrifices humains et politique: quelques exemples contemporains en Afrique' in P. Konings, W. van Binsbergen and G. Hesseling (eds), *Trajectoires de libération en Afrique contemporaine: hommage à Robert Buijtenhuijs*. Paris: Karthala: 207–21.
- Turner, H. (1976) 'The approach to Africa's new religious movements', *African Perspectives* 2: 13–23.
- van Dijk, R. (2001) '"Voodoo" on the doorstep: young Nigerian prostitutes and magic policing in the Netherlands', *Africa* 71 (4): 558–86.
- Weber, M. (1946) 'Politics as a vocation' [Politik als Beruf] in H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (eds), *From Max Weber: essays in sociology*. New York: Oxford University Press: 77–128.
- Westerlund, D. (1985) *African Religion in African Scholarship: a preliminary study of the religious and political background*. Stockholm: Almqvist and Wicksell International.

ABSTRACT

In recent years, it has become common for academic writers to use 'the occult' as an analytical category to which are assigned various types of mystical belief and activity that are quite widespread in Africa, including those often described as 'magic' and 'witchcraft'. It is notable that all these concepts generally go undefined. The present article argues that much of the current academic vocabulary used to describe and analyse the invisible world that many Africans believe to exist is tainted by an intellectual history associated with colonialism. Instead, we propose that much African thought and action related to the invisible world should be considered in terms of religion, with the latter being defined contextually as a belief in the existence of an invisible world, distinct but not separate from the visible one, that is home to spiritual beings with effective powers over the material world.

RÉSUMÉ

Au cours des années récentes, il est devenu courant, pour les auteurs académiques, d'utiliser « l'occulte » comme catégorie analytique à laquelle sont affectés divers types de croyances et d'activités mystiques assez répandues en Afrique, y compris celles que l'on décrit souvent comme « magiques » ou que l'on qualifie de « sorcellerie ». Il est intéressant de noter que tous ces concepts sont généralement non définis. Cet article soutient qu'une grande partie du vocabulaire académique actuellement utilisé pour décrire et analyser le monde invisible que beaucoup d'Africains croient exister est entaché d'une histoire intellectuelle associée au colonialisme. L'article propose plutôt de considérer une grande partie de la pensée et de l'action africaines liées au monde invisible en termes de religion, cette dernière étant définie contextuellement comme une croyance dans l'existence d'un monde invisible, distinct mais non séparé du monde visible, peuplé d'êtres spirituels dotés de pouvoirs réels sur le monde matériel.